

Peter Swirski. *Stanislaw Lem, Philosopher of the Future.* Liverpool University Press 2015. 224 pp. \$120.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781781381861).

Peter Swirski has already established himself as one of the most devoted and knowledgeable critics of Stanislaw Lem. In his new book on this European literary and philosophical giant—his fourth one in the last two years—he brings together all of his interdisciplinary knowledge to reveal the depths of Lem’s prophetic insight. Divided into three parts, the book first offers a rich background to Lem’s life and career and detailed analyses of his literary accomplishments, including a synopsis of the novels not yet translated into English. Laying down biographical facts, Swirski paints a portrait of the writer as ‘cerebral, sarcastic, chronically impatient, and infinitely creative... physically unexceptional’ man with ‘extraordinary gifts of imagination and inventiveness’ (12-3). Relying on their personal correspondence, he underlines those biographical details that directly influenced Lem’s writings in terms of themes, style and choices of subject matter. Most dominant among these was the war, during which Lem was partly involved in the resistance movement by smuggling combat supplies to the Resistance.

Throughout the book, Swirski builds a framework of philosophical and scientific concepts within which Lem’s works should be read, in particular its most significant aspect: Lem’s unyielding concern for knowledge supported by his conviction that literature is an epistemologically valuable tool for exploring reality. As he makes evident already on the first pages, not many critics writing about Lem were aware of this—often provoking Lem’s dissatisfaction and even disdain—nor did they recognize the important disciplines or conceptual schemes that were the backbone to Lem’s work. These primarily include cybernetics, artificial intelligence, evolutionary studies, game-theory, cyberevolution and theory of mind. Anyone familiar with Swirski’s own views on the cognitive potentialities of literature, not to mention his belief in interdisciplinary studies, will not find this surprising. A recurring element in Lem is the path toward absolute control of bioevolution made possible by technological advancements. In numerous of his works he explores the progress and outcome of this evolution, challenging on the way all that we think humanity is. There is hardly any aspect of being human that Lem did not tackle, and Swirski does an amazing job in revealing how various humanistic concerns are developed throughout Lem’s numerous fiction and nonfiction. Some might object to the absence of male-female relations and emotional/sexual aspects of human interactions in Lem’s literary analysis of humanity, but as the writer explains, ‘I had always been fascinated with the human species (*Homo sapiens* as the last living type of hominids) while being perfectly indifferent to its individual variations’ (186).

Swirski is at his best in the second part, where he brings together philosophical, literary, social, political and scientific aspects of four of Lem’s novels that remain mostly unknown in the English speaking world – *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, *Return from the Stars*, *The Invincible* and *The Chain of Chance*. Reiterating some of the points he elaborated in his other works, particularly regarding the scientific achievements against which Lem was writing, he locates these novels against other major literary and philosophical accomplishments of Lem, such as *The Futurological Congress* and *The Star Diaries*, as well as against literary works of other writers, from Kafka to Hemingway, where parallels with Lem invite such comparisons. Crucial however is the way he elaborates on Lem’s fundamental epistemic drive to challenge humanity and its commitments, values and ideas, particularly the thesis ‘about the anthropomorphism that pervades our culture in general and science in particular’ (124). Knowledge is for Lem the focal point and Swirski employs all of his mastery to reveal how deeply Lem probes the conceptual frameworks upon which we build our society, conduct

our scientific research and organize our lives. Gathering all of Lem's philosophical ammunition, Swirski surpasses all of Lem's interpreters in explaining deeply interwoven connections between philosophical and literary aspects of Lem's books, which justify Lem's fame in philosophical circles. From human actions and motivation, rationality, power struggles, survival of our species, group behavior, patriotism, aggression, behavioral control to social engineering, reliability of our knowledge gathering processes, randomness and causality, there is hardly a philosophical theme that Lem did not tackle.

Constant in Lem is his ability to address issues that, even if inspired by real world events, are not bound to them but transcend them to the constants of human nature. In talking about *Memoires*, Swirski writes: 'A literary philosopher rather than a partisan ideologue, Lem models an institutionally universal type of situation instead of politically specific one, which ensures its continued relevance in our millennium' (74). This is a literary device repeatedly employed by Lem, whether he is probing the limits of human nature by designing an aggression-free society in *Return from the Stars* or the limits of the causal explanations scientists are so fond of in *The Chain of Chance*. Bringing together ethics, technology and science fiction, Lem designs thought experiments that today may seem more relevant than ever, given that we are but a step away from having at our disposal the technology to take control over natural processes (evolution) and to gain access into mental states of others through mind control techniques.

Lem's brilliance is perhaps best seen in his ability to put his work to multiple purposes, as Swirski explains: 'Time and time again Lem's works reflect, as well as reflect on, the cognitive premises that went into their making. Two pivotal types of this self-reflexivity can be traced to Lem's meta-enquires into the nature of scientific, philosophical, and literary inquiries as well as into the interplay between the cognitive and narrative levels in his stories' (122). Each literary masterpiece is thus also a philosophical treatise, a meta-reflection on the literature itself and literature's ability to be an epistemic tool. No wonder that so often Lem's works defy being pigeonholed as literature or philosophy, or being classified within the boundaries of one literary genre. Though he is universally acclaimed for pushing the boundaries of science fiction, Swirski argues that Lem is a tireless literary experimenter whose novels combine elements of medical thrillers, detective novels, mystery, allegories, utopia, horror stories, gothic, fairy tales, historical epics, confessional writing and many others. Such a mix-and-match approach explains why Lem is 'a nobrow master, writing highbrow fiction in the idiom of a popular thriller and dressing up thought experiments in social studies as detective brain-teasers' (161).

Though widely regarded as science fiction writer – a classification Lem rejected – he produced 'a wildly heterogeneous body of writing including poetry, fiction, metafiction, autobiography, drama, literary theory and criticism, popular science and futurology, anthropological and analytical philosophy, sociocultural analyses, book reviews, newspaper columns and magazine feuilletons, radio and television screenplays, film scripts, volumes of polemical writings' (20). Commenting on Lem's literary opus, Swirski explains: 'Over the decades, on the thematic level Lem returns from the stars to preoccupy himself with the concerns of our here-and-now. On the narrative level, he gradually trades in characterizations for macro analyses of sociocultural and techoscientific trends and patterns. And on the stylistic level, he progressively pushes all genre conventions to the limit in the 1960s before taking a quantum leap into metafiction of the 1970s and beyond' (28).

In the third part, Swirski fixes his attention on *Fiasco*, 'the closing chapter of Lem's literary life' (179), and *The Blink of an Eye*, a book on prognoses from the year 2000. With an insight that

always went beyond the here-and-now of scientific achievements and social circumstances, Lem had the ability to anticipate the ethical struggles that await societies given our scientific and technological achievements. Swirski sees *Fiasco* as Lem's gloomy diagnosis on the future of humanity and its overall ethical make up: 'primed economically for producing machines of war, our civilization might be paving the way for eventual self-destruction' (167-68). Lem's interest in humanity generally rather than individuals is evident also in *The Blink of an Eye*, which is for the most part concerned with the impact of global communication networks and bio-genetic research. Lem's vision of what the future holds for humanity remains gloomy and sceptical, as evident in the closing sentence of the book which announces 'Happy end of the world'.

One of the defining features of great literature is that it never fails to address issues that concern the very core of being human. Lem does this over and over again, finding new literary ways to challenge our philosophical understanding of who we are. But the map he provided for us on this epistemic journey is not always easily decipherable. Lem's stylistic innovations, genre-mixture and overall defiance of literary conventions, not to mention his urge to turn literature on its head by challenging its boundaries and merging it with philosophy, might seem a turn off for readers who are simply after an enjoyable read. *Stanislaw Lem: Philosopher of the Future* shows why taking Lem seriously is, nevertheless, worth the effort. Swirski's lifetime of study of this European genius and his immense knowledge from various knowledge-seeking disciplines make him the perfect guide to the world of Stanislaw Lem. Discussing not only Lem's classics such as *Solaris* but his less studied works, his book is a prime example of the relevance of literary criticism for contemporary social and political issues and a great testament to the philosophical potentials of literature. It is a must-read not only for admirers of Lem but for all who see literature and philosophy as relevant for what they tell us about ourselves. Going further than any other interpreter of Lem, Swirski unravels the depths of Lem's philosophical fiction forcing us to face our human nature and our possibly bleak human future.

Iris Vidmar, Auburn University and University of Rijeka